DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 720 SO 031 877

AUTHOR	Morrell, Ernest
TITLE	Curriculum and Popular Culture: Building Bridges and Making Waves.
PUB DATE	2000-04-00
NOTE	32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Alienation; Classroom Research; *Curriculum Development; High School Students; High Schools; Instructional Effectiveness; *Popular Culture; Social Studies; *Student Needs; Teacher Researchers; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*Critical Literacy; Critical Pedagogy; *Literary Canon; Youth Culture

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential of incorporating elements of popular culture such as music, film, and court trials as a bridge to help students traditionally alienated by the canonical texts they confront in the "standard" curriculum to conquer and gain a critical understanding of those texts. Sometimes complex, canonical texts can be intimidating and alienating to certain students, especially those with limited exposure to these texts. Those same students exhibit the critical and analytical skills that would serve them well in-class around elements of popular culture. Several units were designed for an urban high school population that combined a major film or genre of popular music with a canonical text of similar themes. The first unit analyzed for the project begins with "The Godfather Trilogy" and incorporates Homer's "Odyssey", while the second unit joins Richard Wright's "Native Son" with the film "A Time To Kill." The paper hopes to call attention to the need for more teacher-conducted classroom research and also to encourage creative approaches to instruction that emanate from the worlds and perceptions of the students and are based on a sound theoretical framework. (Contains 11 references.) (BT)

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Curriculum and Popular Culture: Building Bridges and Making Waves

Ernest Morrell
Graduate School of Education
Language, Literacy, and Culture Division
University of California, Berkeley
Send Correspondence to: morrell@gseis.ucla.edu

SO 031 877

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, LA
April 2000

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As class was ending and I packed up the video camera equipment, I could still hear students arguing over the role of women in classic Greece as compared to today. Several students approached me to ask my opinion or to further argue their point. This lasted through most of the passing period and, not wanting them to be late to fourth period, I hurried them off to their next class. As I continued to clean, I thought back to the presentation. How a nervous Paris bumbled through the first book but recovered nicely during the question and answer portion, how Shalia and Chan went toe to toe for five minutes about whether Penelope should be excused for her actions. I remembered Hong and Jasmine patiently articulate to the group why Athene had to disguise herself as a man when providing aid to the young Telemachus. Shalia and Lien, however, were adamant. "She didn't do women today any favors," I remember Shalia saying, "just think where we'd be today if all women felt that way!" Almost everyone had participated in the discussion that lasted the entire period. Everyone except my three boys in the back. I'll ask them to move closer tomorrow if none of them are presenting.

Today's class was truly inspirational as well as enlightening for myself both as a teacher and researcher. I hope that all of the other presentations go as well. The Odyssey is one of the most difficult texts to read and understand and this "remedial" English class is having fierce debates questioning the author's intentions and interrogating characters' motives! I think of the research project and wish that my intended audience of educators and fellow researchers could have witnessed this event. However, that not being possible, I feel compelled to describe this project to the best of my ability and explain how the results of this presentation were achieved.
-Excerpt from field notes

This paper seeks to explore the potential of incorporating elements of popular culture such as music, film, and court trials as a bridge to help students traditionally alienated by the canonical texts they confront in the "standard" curriculum to conquer and gain a critical understanding of them. During my years of teaching high school English and taking graduate courses, I read about and experienced first hand how complex, canonical texts could be intimidating and alienating to certain students. I found this to be particularly true for the population I worked with at East Bay High[1]. A majority of my students had limited exposure to these texts and, when they did encounter them, usually had bad experiences of feeling ignorant or incompetent. Early in my teaching career when

[1] East Bay High is a fictitious name used to protect the anonymity of the school site where I conducted this research.

I would assign an extensive novel, play, or poetic work, I'd see the looks of fear and insecurity on my students' faces. At the same time, I noticed these same students exhibiting the critical and analytical skills that would serve them well in class around elements of popular culture. Students could critique, discuss, and debate films and rap songs. I began to understand that I could utilize this expertise and motivation to help students gain understanding and confidence to navigate traditional curricular texts.

With this in mind, I designed several units that combined a major film or genre of popular music with a canonical text of similar themes. The first unit analyzed for this project begins with "The Godfather" Trilogy and incorporates Homer's *The Odyssey*. The second unit joins Richard Wright's *Native Son* with the film "A Time to Kill".

Background

The terms critical pedagogy, counterhegemonic curriculum, and popular culture have, as of late, gained increasing popularity in academic circles as educators seek new ways to empower students who have previously been marginalized in the educational system or have been oppressed by this system and society at large. In order to understand the premise or rationale for the classroom units that will be analyzed for this paper, it is important to engage in a brief discussion of these and related terms.

Freire, (1970) explains that the only way that the "oppressed" can liberate themselves from their oppression is to first be able to label or name the oppression and recognize this oppression not as an immutable fact, but a changeable reality. This level of consciousness, Freire argues, can not come about when students are treated as mere receptacles of teacher knowledge. Rather, they must be allowed to engage in dialogue that critiques the existing social order and feel that their opinions and knowledge are respected and valued. Such dialogue Freire coined liberatory dialogue. Inspired by

Freire's work, Critical Pedagogues have studied schools in both their historical and sociopolitical contexts where teaching is a vehicle for social change (Harris and Hodges 1995). According to Henry Giroux(1983), critical pedagogy is "..the reconstruction of social imagination in the service of human freedom." It involves both the practices students and teachers engage in and the cultural politics such practices support. Hull (1993) argues that the chief goal of critical pedagogy for students is to develop analytical skills and moral initiative to transform, not just serve the dominant social order. In a similar vein, McLaren (1989) contends that teachers must employ critical pedagogy to empower students or enable them to understand and engage the world around them as well as to generate the courage needed to change the social order when necessary. Critical pedagogy, then, can be seen as a tool for students, such as those at East Bay High School, who have, through their educational experience, been disempowered or cajoled into accepting a status as second class citizens.

Related to critical pedagogy is the concept of critical literacy in which students are able to not only read and write, but also have the ability to assess texts in order to understand the relationships between power and domination that underlie and inform them (Hull 1993). In this way, literary texts serve not only an educational purpose, but also a social and political one as well. Bridging canonical texts with elements of popular culture such as film allows the students to draw correlations between the power struggles existent in their world and those in literary works thousands of years old. Gramsci (1971) defines hegemony as the ideological/cultural domination of one class by another achieved through controlling the content of cultural forms and major institutions. Gramsci's ideas are employed by Apple (1979, 1996), to argue that hegemony and hegemonic curriculum have historically prevented and discouraged marginalized students from critiquing or challenging existing inequities in power relations, or

necessarily feeling empowered to demand change or reconsider their evaluations of themselves as students and citizens. The controlled class was generally unaware of the influence of hegemony on their thinking because the dominant class had used its power to control the thinking of the subordinated and oppressed class. Therefore, their oppression and subordination in the power structure were seen by them as expected as they were taught to think this way. In this manner, the existing power structure was maintained. According to Gramsci, the education system was one of the central institutions used by the dominant class to ensure their superiority.

Apple, (1979) argues that teaching is a political act and neutrality does not exist when it comes to education. Any attempt to teach the "standard" curriculum without question or critique is political because it implicitly supports the hegemony of the dominant class. Apple demonstrates how curriculum choices, teaching styles, and approaches to "factual" disciplines like science and history all function to promote the continued superiority of the dominant class at the expense of the subordinated groups. These groups, in turn are not only more inclined to fail, but they come to embrace and accept that failure. Apple promotes the concept of a counterhegemonic curriculum that teaches these students to question what has previously been accepted as fact and also to question their present condition in school and in society. In *Cultural Politics and Education* (1996), he makes the argument that part of re-conceiving official knowledge and creating a curriculum of resistance entails the usage of elements of popular culture:

> Anything "popular" is soiled. It is not quite serious knowledge. Because of this, too often we assume that popular literature, popular culture, popular mathematics and science are failed knowledge. It is not quite real. Popular knowledge is pathologized, at least in comparison to the existing academic curriculum, which is seen as uplifting and neutral.

> Yet the existing curriculum is never a neutral assemblage of knowledge...we should know by now that popular culture is partly a site of resistance and struggle, but also that for schooling to make a difference it must connect to popular understandings and cultural forms. (p.95)

The units chosen for this project seek to build upon the works of these theorists. My goal in this paper is to analyze the practical applications of their theories through lessons that allow students to draw from personal experiences and develop a sense of social responsibility and confidence to, if necessary resist harmful hegemonic influences while having their personal and cultural knowledge valued. It is also crucial, however, to provide exposure to canonical texts that dominate the traditional curriculum and are often used in the discipline of English as gatekeepers and parameters of intelligence and proficiency.

Methods

Setting

East Bay High is an urban, multicultural school of nearly 2200 students. The ethnic breakdown of the campus is approximately 40-45% Asian/Asian American (Chinese, Vietnamese, and Southeast Asian), 35% African American, 15% Chicano/Latino, and 5-10% other immigrant groups (i.e. Bosnian, African). There is a less than 1% white American population. At East Bay High standardized test scores lag far behind state and national norms, the school regularly scores in the twentieth and thirtieth percentile on major standard assessments such as the Stanford 9, the CAP, and CLAS assessments and the median SAT score, for the past five years, has been below 700 which would place the student below the tenth percentile nationally. According to the 1995-96 School

Accountability Report Card, 56% of the school population is eligible to receive AFDC.

Participants

My participants are a 12th grade English class that I teach at the school. This particular class consists of 25 students and closely resembles the demographics of the school at large. There are several recently mainstreamed ESL students, two students who were kicked out of academy programs, six students who began the spring semester of their senior year short credits to graduate, two students who spend a portion of their day in the special education program, two mothers and one expecting mom. Since the beginning of the year, four of the original students have dropped out of school and one (the expecting mother) is on independent study.

This focal class is a group of individuals who haven't been accustomed to doing this type of work[2] . The Honors students have slightly more experience but this is a "P" class, and at East Bay High, although the "P" ironically stands for college prep, a "P" class really means, "...the rest of the bunch". About 40 students each year are groomed to be the elite and they have Honors and Advanced Placement English and all their classes are carefully constructed. During third period, which is when this focal class meets, the AP circuit has AP Physics, so, obviously, no one in this third period can take that class because they have their P English class. AP English meets first period, and Honors English meets second period so their schedules are freed up for AP Physics (3rd period) and AP

[2] By this type of work I was referring to the complexity of the literature and the form of interaction with text. This judgment was made based on five years of teaching experience in the department where I have observed the method of instruction with the English II-P and III-P classes and attempted similar units with IV-P classes in the past. I also based this judgment on comments overheard from class members, individual discussions with students, and comments made about past English instruction in interviews and on a Biographical Data sheet that was handed out to each student.

Calculus (5th period). Leadership class, which is reserved for class and student body officers meets during 4th period. The rest of the students are pretty much left to their own resolve. Most of them, if they have post secondary plans are going to a community college, otherwise, they are going to work. Of the focal class, only two students of 25 have been accepted to a four-year university. When the class was polled[3], 21 of the 25 students indicated that their post high school plans consisted of either work, community college, or a trade school. This class is literally the "rejects" of the public school system. In their "P" classes in the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades, they haven't read the novels from the suggested reading list , they haven't been asked to write many essays, they haven't been asked to use computers . Helping them arrive at a point where they are able to be critical and able to critique a text like *The Odyssey* is, in my opinion, a big step. That provides all the more reason to examine this class in particular given that it is truly reflective of the demographics of the school with respect to grade point average, socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic representation, and second language learners. Of the three students that have above a 3.0 G.P.A., two were recently mainstreamed from the bilingual program and one was recently mainstreamed from the Special Day class.

Focal Students

[3] I have taken several polls in the class where I asked students of their post secondary plans. The first survey occurs on the first day of school with a questionnaire that the students all receive. Others are done more informally by hand raising and one on one discussions. I gave an extra credit question on the Odyssey Quiz where I asked the students of their plans for the follcwing year (which was in late February). Several students did not have a chance to respond to the question as they ran out of time on the Quiz so I offered another opportunity for the students to respond to this question of a Biographical questionnaire that was handed out during the first week of march. Two students indicated that they had immediate plans to attend a four-year university but, at the time of this research, only one had been accepted.

My case study follows this class, and three focal students in particular, through a twelve-week period where they were engaged in segments of two units that combine elements of popular culture and canonical texts. The first unit integrates The Godfather trilogy, a series of acclaimed films directed by Francis Ford Coppola, with Homer's *The Odyssey* and the second joins "A Time to Kill", a 1996 film based on the John Grisham novel with Richard Wright's *Native Son* and culminates in a court trial. I chose three key informants for this study, Jasmine, Shalia, and Chan[4], all females, who I feel exemplify the class and the student body. Jasmine is an African American young woman who will be attending a local state university in the fall. She averages C grades in her English classes despite being extremely articulate and engaging. She also ranks in the lower half of her graduating class. In her words, English is her favorite class this year because it is motivating. After graduation, she has no idea of what she will do, she just knows that she wants to make things better.

Shalia is also an African American student and also ranked in the middle quartile of her class. Although she claims to have had good English teachers, she has never received an A grade for any semester in English. She transferred into my English class at the end of the Fall semester despite receiving a B in her previous class because, ..."the class was not challenging and the teacher is racist." Her transfer may also be related to the fact that I coached her for two seasons in basketball and have developed a close relationship with her and her family. Shalia has applied to, and has been accepted by a radiology program at a local community college that she will be attending in the fall. Chan is a Chinese student that has had difficult experiences in high school. During her sophomore year of high school, she became pregnant and was kicked out of her home. She received

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[4] The names of the students have been changed to protect their privacy.

straight D's and F's during this period. Upon her return, she was placed in special education courses from which she chose to remove herself. She transferred into my class at the end of the Fall semester from a special education English class in which she received a D. Her resource teacher refused to allow her to be in my class because, in her words, "..it's too much. It will hurt her." I refused to let Chan go, and she refused to leave the class, so, she was able to stay as long as she wasn't failing. Chan has made up the credits to graduate and plans to enroll in a local community college in the Fall. I observed these three students' participation in groups, discussions, and presentations as well as conversations that occur during the film watching segments.

Being a teacher, I was very much a participant in the classroom setting, but I decided to distance myself through the extensive use of audio and video equipment. Also, as the class was very student centered and the students spent much of this segment working in groups or making presentations, I had ample time to step back and watch although I normally had to wait until after class before I could start writing field notes, which was frustrating at times. Although wearing two hats in the classroom may be difficult, I believe that this study holds powerful implications for educators being ethnographers of their students and conducting research in their own classrooms. I also believe that the benefits of being intimately related to the students and working with them closely on a daily basis outweighs the drawbacks of attempting to maintain distance and objectivity. The data sources I generated were: field notes, video and audio tapes of students working in groups, participating in classroom discussions and making presentations, transcriptions of conversations, and examples of student work including notes essays and examinations.

When looking at the impact that incorporating elements of popular culture has on facilitating the transition to canonical texts and improving academic performance on these

texts, it is difficult to quantify terms such as "success" and "improvement" with statistics, percentages, raised test scores, grades, and increased wordage on essays and class discussions. Rather, through a qualitative approach that focuses on observation and analysis, I looked for evidence of increased motivation and quality interactions among students in discussions and presentations that demonstrated an understanding of the complex canonical text.

What I actually did was study my English IV class over a two-month period through two units. During these two units there were four major types of events that occurred. One of which was large group discussions or debates and those large group discussions occurred either as a result of the question and answers during presentations or formal debates for test preparation or discussions after a film viewing. The second type of event was small group discussions . Small group discussions occurred specifically in preparation for either a larger presentation or a debate. The film watching occurred during the first part of each unit while the students were simultaneously reading the novel at home. Presentations were formal events where a small group took over a portion of the class answering a central critical question and facilitating the discussion.

Within these four events I wanted to look at: when students were bridging popular cultural texts and canonical texts, the discussion of canonical text, relating the popular cultural texts to every day lives, and referring the canonical text to every day issues. I closely examined how students were able to use segues, the process of travelling back and forth between popular culture and the text, between a text and life experiences, or between the canonical text and a text that wasn't a part of the class curriculum.

Arguing occurred in the context of large group discussions and debates and small group discussions and presentations. Arguing, here, is defined as overtly or specifically stating disagreement with a comment that was made by either the teacher or a fellow

student. Being willing to argue demonstrates a confidence and a level of mastery over the text that is being argued. It is rather difficult to argue about something about which one doesn't feel confident. *Critiquing*, the tearing down, or deconstructing an argument or the text also shows a certain confidence in the level of mastery over the subject matter.

In addition, I looked for instances of *clarifying* and *assisting* when students did this with each other. The desire to clarify or assist shows that students are willing to contribute their knowledge to the class knowledge so all classmates can benefit from all knowledge. I also noted examples of *problematizing*, such as: why did Odysseus do this? or Richard Wright have this character do that? Why was "A Time to Kill a racist film even though it claimed to be critiquing racism?" Problematizing requires a proficiency in deconstructing and critiquing the text. Also, instances of *politicizing* and *contemporizing*, taking issues that occurred in either the popular cultural text or the canonical text and relating them to recent political events, were documented. I wanted to look for as many examples as possible of the segues, arguing, critiquing, clarifying, assisting, problematizing, politicizing and contemporizing through the events and through the large group discussions, debates and small group discussions, the film watching, and the presentations.

I also think it's important to note that all of the action codes that I utilized in analyzing data demonstrate a knowledge or mastery of the text. Also, they signify a confidence of the students in their knowledge or mastery of the text and as well demonstrate that the students have "demystified" the canonical text in their discussion and see their reservoir of popular cultural knowledge on an equal plane with canonical textual knowledge. This is evidenced particularly in discussions of canonical text and in referring the canonical text to every day issues. When using popular culture and their own experiences to enhance an argument or debate about a canonical text it shows that

these students see the knowledge that they have gained in their own personal experience as worthy of use in a heated argument situation.

Findings

The following section contains five narrative vignettes each chosen to represent a particular stage of the unit which I feel are illustrative of the powerful connections that students were able to make between the popular cultural text, the canonical text, and their every day lives. The vignettes are arranged chronologically according to the order they occur in the units. Although two distinct units are discussed in this paper with the *Odyssey*/"Godfather" unit preceding *Native Son*/"A Time to Kill", both units adhered to the same structure of film watching, book discussion, preparing for and delivering classroom presentations. The first vignette, entitled "Free Carl Lee" occurs during a film watching section of "A Time to Kill". The second vignette, "Chan's Chat Group" occurs in preparation for a presentation of *The Odyssey* and "The Godfather". "That's the Problem With Females Now-a-Days", occurs when Shalia's group, is presenting on *The Odyssey* and "The Godfather". The fourth vignette, "Superman Didn't Cry", occurs during a debate in preparation for the exam on *The Odyssey* and "The Godfather". The final story, "The Justice Connection", occurs on the final day of the unit when Jasmine's group is presenting on whether or not there was justice for Carl Lee Hailey in "A Time to Kill" and Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*.

Free Carl Lee

The class is watching "A Time to Kill" and, during this particular segment, there are racial riots around the trial of Carl Lee. Carl Lee Hailey is a black man who is on trial for

killing the two white men who raped his daughter and left her for dead and, as the trial approaches in the film, racial tensions escalate. The NAACP comes from up North to lobby on the side of Carl Lee and the KKK comes from the Deep South to lobby on the side of the two white men that were killed.

As the racial tensions escalate in the movie, the class becomes more emotionally charged and begins to identify with the blacks in the film and actually root for them. There is one part during a racial riot where a black women and a Klan member are having an argument and they end up getting into a fistfight which emerges into a race riot. As the black woman hits the man, Shalia jumps out of her seat and claps her hands and says, "Oh, I like that one". Also as the riot begins to escalate on the film, Claude, another student in the class is leaning forward in his seat and looks as if he's more attentive and he starts laughing and clapping. Lu and Chan who are sitting in the front also lean forward and Lu, who did not have her pen, picks up her pen and begins to start writing. Then one of the young black boys torches a Klan member, actually it is Stu Sisson who is the Grand Wizard of the Klan. He gets killed during this scene and I stopped the tape for a brief moment and asked, "Is this justice?" Shalia responds, "A little bit", and Robin, another student in the class replies, "On one side, one side has justice", while Alex, another African-American student sitting in the back of the class is smiling and shaking his head "yes".

As the scene continues, Shalia turns around and asks a question of Claude, who is laughing and clapping his hands in approval. Alex comments on the police officer who is secretly with the Klan, Deputy Hastings, "Isn't he a part of them?" he asks. Chan also interjects a comment to the group, so as the scene escalates, also the attention in the class escalates as students begin identifying and discussing with one another and actually becoming emotionally involved with the scene as they begin to relate it to their own

everyday experiences. As the section continues, the National Guard is called in and Jake Brigance, the main character, has his house burned down by the Klan. Harry Rex, who is another white attorney encourages Jake to drop the case. When that happens, Shalia responds that Harry Rex is making her "heck-a mad" for asking Jake to drop the case. It is as if Carl Lee Hailey and these characters are real to the class at this point. Jake turns down Harry Rex's offer and says that he is going to trial.

The scene shifts to the next day outside of the courthouse where the trial is about to take place. The NAACP is chanting "Free Carl Lee" and the Klan is chanting "Fry Carl Lee". I turned off the video at this point so we could discuss the segment. Claude puts his head down and says, "Why do you have to stop the tape here?" which is his daily routine. Chan raises her fist and yells "Free Carl Lee!" and members of the class laugh.

This vignette demonstrates how the class is beginning to relate the popular cultural text to their everyday lives. Obviously this is a film and the story is fictional and the characters are fictional but the emotion surrounding the issues of racism and justice where the students are upset with characters and clapping and cheering and pumping fists shows that the students are politicizing this film and relating it to similar issues in their own lives. During the discussion of the film on this particular day, students including Lu and Chan share stories about how they were victims of racial violence Chan's raising her fist at the end of the film also indicates that she is identifying with Carl Lee. Freeing Carl Lee, to them, is victory for the African-Americans, who are the oppressed group in the film. In this sense, there is the possibility that Carl Lee may receive justice after all. Several of the students have claimed that the torching of Sisson is justice and any exoneration of Carl Lee's actions is a victory for the underdogs and the students clearly in this case identify them selves with the underdog. Their willingness to identify with this text enables them to be able to bridge with the film text and to embrace the text

at another level. Rather than looking at Carl Lee and Jake and Ellen as fictional characters, they are looking at what they represent to their own lives in creating that universal plane of knowledge. As they begin to relate the characters to their own every day lives, they juxtapose the text against their every day lives and bring their every day life experiences into their interpretation of this text as Lu, Chan, Claude and Shalia demonstrate during the question and answer section sharing very personal stories of their racial victimization.

Superman Didn't Cry

The following occurs during a debate over whether or not Michael Corleone and Odysseus were epic heroes. This debate was in preparation for an exam that the class had later in the week. The class was divided into two groups and each had a day to prepare. During the debate, each side had ten minutes to present why they felt that Michael Corleone and Odysseus were or were not classic heroes and anyone in the group could respond in a random fashion. Then each side would alternate in asking questions to the other side to critique their argument. When Group two was presenting their direct statement about why Odysseus in particular was not an epic hero, Jasmine, one of the focal students made the following argument. Brackets [] in this section, are meant to indicate simultaneous dialogue:

Jasmine: Odysseus can't be a hero because he's weak! He cried on Circe's island, he cried on the dead man's island or whatever, he cried during De... De...

T: Demodokos (Jasmine laughs)

Jasmine: Demodokos' singing so, heroes don't cry. You never see Superman crying, you don't see [Hercules crying]

Paris: [or Batman]

Jasmine: You don't see Zeus crying. You don't see Xena crying and she a woman. You don't see none of

those people crying so he can't be a hero [because he's weak].

Paris: (shaking his head) [exactly, that's what I'm saying].

Jasmine: He can't be a hero if he's weak. He can't cry! If you sleep with no woman. You look at these men around here, you go to Steve Urkel, he don't be crying even when Laura be turning him down so he (Odysseus) can't be no hero.

Essentially, Jasmine's argument is that Odysseus was a weak person because he was crying all the time. She uses examples from the text such as the references to Demodokos' singing, Circe's island. and Hades. In this instance, to make a canonical textual argument, Jasmine is referring to Odysseus and his status as an epic hero. She's arguing, she's critiquing the first group's assertions, she is questioning Odysseus being upheld by the text as an epic hero and in making her argument she is using as her examples instances of her popular culture. When she says Hercules, she's referring not to the traditional legacy of Hercules in the Greek epics, but Hercules from the movie "Hercules" and the "Batman" that Paris chimes is a cartoon and a mythical film character. Batman has been in several recent films that the students have watched. Jasmine's use of Xena and Hercules are her ways of equating how popular culture characterizes this period of history. Hercules and Xena look like they would have been around during the time of *The Odyssey*. But then, Jasmine takes it one step further when she says "you look at these men around here." She is analyzing her own society where, in her opinion, we don't allow our heroes to cry. But then she goes to another level when "look at these men around here" also includes Steve Urkel from "Family Matters." Steve Urkel is not around here. Steve Urkel is a fictional character on television. So Jasmine takes a fictional man Odysseus from what may or may not be based on actual history and makes an argument about his status as a hero using television characters and then brings the argument to her

own world and in her own world, using a television character, that is more contemporary. Hercules and Xena were characters from contemporary film that portray ancient characters. Steve Urkel was a character in contemporary television that portrays a contemporary character. Jasmine feels a close enough tie with Steve Urkel's world to say men around here when referring to him .Urkel, a skinny, whining "nerd" from a popular television show, does not require introduction or explanation. Everyone in the class understands that he is the complete antithesis of what one would expect in a hero and even he doesn't cry when things don't go his way.

Comparing Odysseus to Steve Urkel, in this light, is the ultimate insult of his supposed manhood as Jasmine defines it. So Jasmine has established that universal plane of knowledge where knowledge free flows in all directions. She's using her own world to inform the canonical text. She's using her understanding of film and television to facilitate her discussion of the canonical text. She's also using her own every day opinions and perceptions to inform her reading of the text. She doesn't just compare Odysseus to other people in the Odyssey although she does include Zeus and Zeus doesn't cry. She uses all the knowledge, she taps into the reservoir and from that reservoir comes up with a very rich critique of Odysseus as a hero. It may not be one that everyone agrees with but it's one that's well supported. It's well supported not in the traditional sense of the text but well supported when you factor in the reservoir of knowledge which she brings into the class with her and the myriad of examples she uses to explain and justify her stance.

Chan's Chat Group

It is the final day of preparation for group presentations on *The Odyssey* and "The Godfather." Lu, Tiet, Hong and Chan are attempting to figure out the order and design of their presentation. Hong is reading the text to determine who initiated the affair between Odysseus and Calypso. "Oh, she started it," Tiet laughs and initiates the following dialogue:

Chan: Do you think that females have control of the males? I think so, do you think so? (laughing) I think females control males with sex (whole group laughs).

Tiet: (gesturing to her shoulder) They wear a sexy little thing and he be all under control (more laughter).

Chan, here, segues from the textual discussion of Odysseus and Calypso to introduce her worldview of femininity and sex roles comparing Calypso, a fictional goddess, with females in general. Tiet's response also shows a contemporization of the issue presented in the text. Her references to teasing and lingerie are clearly not from Ancient Greece, yet aid the group in coming to an understanding of the text as they connect it to an issue that has some pertinence to them.

As the conversation gets serious again, Tiet informs Hong that she will guide the group into their argument about the status of females. "Yes," Chan responds, "you have a very important part, and (turning to Tiet) so do you." When the conversation shifts to whether Odysseus ever slept with Nausikaa, Chan initiates another conversation:

Chan: (leaning over her desk to Hong and whispering) Did Odysseus sleep with Nausikaa too?

Hong: (Blank expression)

Lu: (turning to the teacher) Mr. Morrell, did Odysseus ever sleep with Nausikaa?

T: No, but he probably wanted to (at this Tiet looks at Hong and laughs). Remember, when she found him by the shore, she was already in love with him...

Lu: It was like love at first sight?

T: Yeah, he didn't sleep with her because her father was around.

Chan: You know what's kind of funny, he kind of liked (Nausikaa) but he didn't slept with her, but the person he didn't like...he slept with

Hong: Isn't she young enough to be his daughter?

T: Yeah (Chan laughs)

Lu: Ooh, that's sick!

Chan: That's how it was...that's what I was trying to tell you. That's the old ways, the old values. In new values you might think it's sick but, in the old values, it wasn't. It comes from the past to the present (gesturing in a circular motion), you know, in a circle.

If Chan's role is as leader of this group who seems to be comfortable with the conversational style of group preparation, Hong's role is as the textual expert. Although she is not as vocal as the other members, Chan assures her that her role is "a very important one". Hong's task is to clarify and assist the other group members in understanding the literal text. It is she who informs Tiet that Calypso initiates the affair with Odysseus and it is to her that Chan directs the question of the nature of Odysseus' relationship with Nausikaa. It is only when Hong is unable to respond that the teacher, myself, is consulted.

Immediately following my response, Hong and Chan, through their statements, are questioning the motives and actions of the main character. The conversation elevates beyond a mere understanding of the text as these students are willing to offer value judgments of the protagonist. These critiques of Odysseus are predicated upon Chan's initial comments about female sex roles where Calypso and Odysseus became representatives of females and males respectively. Lu is also using her own value system

to critique Odysseus' actions when she calls him "sick". She has also clearly gone beyond a mere comprehension of the text in calling his behavior into question. Chan, in her role as leader and facilitator of this group, acknowledges Lu's critique but also cautions her against using her value system to judge too hastily. Chan recognizes the limitations of contemporizing an ancient text without paying attention to the values of the time period in which the text was written. Chan doesn't dismiss Lu's analysis, but she adds to it a historical critique that, from the standpoint of his society, Odysseus' actions may not be that out of place.

The group members' ability to clarify, assist, and critique each other while also questioning the text using both their value system and world knowledge coupled with a historical awareness allowed for a high level engagement and criticism of a difficult canonical text. Chan's leadership and sensitivity and knowledge of when to use popular cultural knowledge (I think females control men with sex) and when to draw the line tremendously aided her Group's effectiveness.

That's the Problem With Females Now-a Days

This incident takes place immediately following a presentation made by Shalia's group on the first four books of *The Odyssey*. After we finished "The Godfather" epic and were through the first sixteen books of *The Odyssey*, the class was divided into four groups and each group had a week to prepare a presentation on a four- book segment from *The Odyssey*. So group 1 had books 1-4, group 2 had books 5 - 8, group 3 had books 9 - 12 and group 4 had books 13 - 16. Following the week of preparation, each group had a class period to present. For the initial twenty-five to thirty minutes of the presentation the group was to discuss their books and talk about what happened; how did that four book

segment deal with major themes and issues that we had been discussing as part of the unit that carried over from the "Godfather" such as: treatment of women, the role of religion, the characterization of an epic hero, the idea of a voyage to manhood, and other themes that were laid out over the course of the unit. After the 30-minute presentation each group was required to facilitate a 15 - 20 minute discussion where they had to be prepared to ask questions of the class. On the days that they weren't presenting, students were supposed to take presentation notes where the presentation was critiqued. At any rate, Shalia's group had books 1 -4 and during their question and answer period the conversation turned toward Penelope and Athena as representatives of females and questions arose such as: were they strong characters or did they do women any good or were they examples of the traditional subservient female.

Jasmine volunteered to answer first and discussed the role of women in this (Greek) society at this time.

Jasmine: Even Athene, a goddess had to ask permission to help a mortal so someone who is already a mortal, Penelope, would have no chance against the suitors because they're men. They wouldn't even listen to Telemachus who was a man...so, for her to ask them to leave wouldn't do any good.
Shalia: Shouldn't she at least make the suitors aware of her displeasure, that she was unhappy with them being at her house?

At this point, several students wanted to participate from the audience and Jessica began "correcting" Shalia on her critique of Penelope and Telemachus saying that Telemachus only became powerful to the extent that he became a man. Phong, a young man who sits in the back of class and rarely speaks raised his hand, but was beat to the punch by Lu, a gregarious and talkative young woman who sits in the front of the class

who, at this point, just starts speaking and raises her hand mid sentence:

Lu: I think that if Penelope had not lead the suitors on then maybe they would have gotten a clue and left or did something. (By the time Lu had finished her comment three hands were raised, Natasha, Chan, and Phong. Phong was given the floor to speak.

Phong: What I think is that the country (Ithaca) needed a king to lead them. They cannot wait for Odysseus to return because he might not come back. Somebody has to take over.

Lien: If it was so important for the country to have a leader they could have picked one instead of destroying Penelope's house and her life. That's no excuse to come into her home!

Shalia: If a suitor really wanted to marry Penelope then he could have gone to her father to ask permission rather than destroy Odysseus' and Penelope's house. Back in those days, you were supposed to go through the father to ask a lady's hand in marriage.

Chan: You can't blame her, she had no choice, that was the female's role (turning her comments to Phong) Also, if you don't know that Odysseus is dead, how can you go around and say, "Imma pick this king or that king", It's not that simple (returning to the group) Penelope is a female and she has no rights.

Shalia: Does that make it right? Just because She's a female, she shouldn't have any rights?

Chan: I'm not talking about right now, I'm talking about in the past.

Shalia: No, in the past. Did it make it right then?

Chan: In our day, you can tell the suitor off, but in those days, the female can't say nothing. We can talk about Calypso and the other women, but It's all the same, female had no rights then.

Shalia: How do you think we got a voice in the modern day? It Didn't just happen. It started back then. If it Wasn't for someone in 1919 to speak out, we Wouldn't have a voice now! Penelope, instead of sitting upstairs in her room weaving and crying, could have tried to say something then. It'd be better now. That's the problem with females now-a-days. You think that you don't have a right and then you say that It's not right that we don't have a right to voice our opinions... even though things were bad "back then" it still took someone to stand up and change things or else "back then" would still be "right now".

Shalia and Chan have lifted the text into a discussion of their present existence as females and members of oppressed groups. Both Shalia and Chan draw off of their

experiences as young women of color to evaluate the actions of Penelope, a 3000 year-old fictional character.

Shalia: ...and if it Wasn't for someone to step up, it would still be like that now. If you just sit down now and say, "That's the way it was" and you're lax about that, anything that happens in your life right now, you're just going to say, "Oh that's the way It's supposed to be!"

Shalia, here, has politicized the text using her critique of Penelope to further her own political cause. Penelope, in her opinion, is guilty of inaction and inaction will never lead to political change. According to Shalia, people who think like Penelope will always make excuses for the way things are and never attempt to make things better for themselves or for future generations. In justifying her stance, she makes the reference between the political climate in *The Odyssey* and the political climate for women historically utilizing the women's suffrage movement, all the way to the political climate today ending one of her statements, "that's the problem with females now-a-days." Shalia, here, is not just tapping into her reservoir of historical knowledge of the women's suffrage movement and the Civil Right's movement to inform her interpretation of the text, but she is using the text to inform a discussion, a contemporary classroom discussion on the rights of women. Her statement, " that's the problem with females.." is referring to Chan, who's in class and also indirectly refers to Penelope and Athena, fictional characters that are 3,000 years old, all on an equal plane. That you, Chan you, Penelope and you, Athena are all people that subordinate yourselves to the world or the majority at any given time. That complicit, non-revolutionary attitude, according to Shalia, will prevent females from ever being able to change things for themselves.

The Justice Connection

This is the final day of the second unit and the data collection for the research. Group four is presenting its findings on justice in *Native Son* and "A Time to Kill." Phi begins by defining justice as fair and equal treatment. Given the existence of racism and sexism, Phi contends that justice can only be defined individually, not as a society. Because of the will of the majority, he argues, minorities will never receive justice in the United States.

Jasmine states that she believes the ones who receive justice are those with money and power and those that do not receive justice are the poor and homeless. Referring to *Native Son*, she believes that the white community receives justice and that justice is denied to the black belt community. In "A Time to Kill" Jasmine argues that Carl Lee Hailey never received justice "just because Jake and Carla went to their house with some nasty Peach Cobbler". Carl and his family still had to live with racism in the South and he still had to "sleep at night with the image of the murders he committed and knowing that his daughter was raped and called out his name but he Wasn't there to answer."
Viet dealt with the final question of what ultimate commentary the film and the novel make on justice in American society. Viet responds that justice means different things to different people and sometimes, as with Carl Lee, you have to take action into your own hands to receive justice. Viet also believes that Bigger Thomas receives justice when he takes actions into his own hands. The group then proceeds to the question and answer segment of their presentation and Jasmine says that she will start with a question/statement and wants to get the class' response:

Jasmine: Do you think that justice is denied to East Bay High students? Do you agree that It's not fair that

we're treated like prisoners here just from 8:20 to 3:10 because they receive money for every foot that steps in the door instead of treating us like striving individuals who want to better ourselves in education? When students walk into classes, they don't see faces, just dollar signs around our necks. What do you feel about that?

Jasmine, in this one statement, has made a significant leap in terms of critical literacy. She has, from a sound textual analysis of this question, extrapolated the findings to then analyze, question and critique her own world. The directions to the groups were to ask questions to facilitate discussion around the texts (film and novel). Initially I was shocked by the question and doubted its appropriateness but soon realized, from the responses, that this was a textual question. I had worked so diligently to help the students see their world as a powerful source of knowledge for confronting texts that, to them, their world had indeed become text. In Jasmine's eyes, as she would later admit, this was the only logical question to ask at this point in the unit and in the class. The students had been identifying particularly with Carl Lee and the African American community throughout the film, so it was natural that they would, in analyzing whether this man received justice, also analyze their own lives to determine whether their treatment as students and citizens is just. Jasmine's initial question elicits a wave of responses from her peers:

Robin: I agree, I totally agree. I really don't feel that It's right because we don't receive any justice. We come here to learn and we think we're coming into...like a home. When you come home...you expect your mom to...like greet you or whatever. You expect the best. And when you come to school, you expect the best education that you can get. But while you have administrators and what not telling you to stay in one spot and not helping you, no....no....we don't receive justice at all.

Viet: I think It's pretty much all face and appearance for the school to have all these kids inside school. You

know...when they lock the doors, chain the doors, It's just for,...like...face to compete with these other schools so they can look the same as these other schools.

These other students, as a result of Jasmine's question, are also able to make ample critiques of the school system and its failure to give fair and equal treatment to the students. Each gives an opinion and then justifies their opinion with an example and explanation of that example, just as if they were carrying out a traditional textual argument. Robin makes use of a metaphor when she compares the school with a home and textualizes her argument by referring to what she feels to be apathetic administrators. Jasmine's second question, which consumes the duration of the period, is "What does justice look like in our society?"

Robin: Justice is freedom and I...I..don't feel I have freedom. They say I can say anything I want but I know if I was to walk in the president's office and say "this is unfair" (sucks her teeth and makes a hand gesture like the police traffic signal for stopping) you need to be quiet. We have a right to learn...if you go into a teacher's face and say that, we don't have that right!

Chan: Police just like teachers. They drive all around like teachers walk all round. They don't care. They just don't care!

At this point Chan suggests that the class move beyond merely talking about these issues and the group spends the remainder of the period discussing their plans for the final six weeks to help bring justice to the students of East Bay High.

It is worth noting that, after this final presentation, the class chose to devote the final six weeks to creating a magazine that would expose the injustices of East Bay High School. Jasmine, Shalia, and Chan were major catalysts behind the magazine that the class entitled "Serious Voices from Knowledgeable Youth." So far, the magazine has raised

quite a stir around campus as various administrators, campus supervisors, and teachers have been approached and interviewed. A companion video essay has been completed and it, along with a petition of grievances, is being sent to local television stations.

I am not prepared to speculate on t he role that the units played in the creation of the project. However, I am also not willing to write off the connection as pure coincidence either. Throughout the units during the discussions, presentations, and debates, the class, in retrospect, seemed naturally headed for this sort of response. Several key incidents, indeed, foreshadowed it. In establishing powerful connections between the popular world and the academic curriculum, you are ensuring that the knowledge created will not remain confined within the classroom walls. It will necessarily spill out into the real world to deal with real issues.

Discussion

I feel it important to begin this final section with some disclaimers. First of all, I have not presented this unit to become a cookie cutter solution to all of the ills in urban education. Clearly, my students, as many others in similar situations, face a myriad of problems and obstacles that prevent them from achieving their potential. Also, the class is by no means perfect. Students are occasionally disengaged and, for some, truancy remains a large problem. At the time the research was being concluded, one student was assigned to independent study for her role in a violent altercation. Furthermore, I understand that not everyone who attempts this unit will achieve the same results. I recognize that the relationship that a teacher forges with her or his students is at least as important as the choice of curriculum. A teacher who sincerely cares about students will, in my opinion, achieve more positive results following a traditional approach than will a teacher who

attempts to implement these units wholesale without having established any sort of connection with the class.

What I have attempted to demonstrate is that students already possess many of the skills that we, as educators want to impart to them. However, by not allowing them to tap into their huge reservoirs of knowledge, we also prevent many from accessing these skills to navigate the traditional curriculum. The insertion of contemporary film and the conversational format of preparation and presentations, I have argued, allows students to tap into that reservoir and provides a powerful pathway into such canonical texts as The Odyssey and Native Son. Not only were students able to make profound connections between their world and the text, but they imbibed these texts with life and established relevance between the texts and their world. Penelope and Bigger Thomas became icons for contemporary discussions of gender and race. This, for me, was an unexpected benefit and represented a fundamental shift from reading a text to embracing one.

There are several profound implications of this study for educators and researchers alike. What I encourage are creative approaches to instruction that emanate from the worlds and perceptions of the students and are based upon a sound theoretical framework. This will not occur without a serious reconsideration of what constitutes effective instruction. Such reconsideration must be predicated on the belief that all students possess knowledge and talents which traditional education may or may not reveal. I also hope that readers recognize the tremendous potential of incorporating popular culture into the curriculum for increasing motivation, tapping into background knowledge, improving awareness, and, yes, fostering a sociopolitical philosophy. It can also provide students with a model for how to understand and critique their own world.

It is my desire that this paper and ones like it call attention to the need for more teacher-conducted classroom research. Referring to Hymes' comments, this form of

research allows many more classrooms to be studied than would be possible relying solely on university faculty. The training in qualitative research methods will also lead to an increased sensitivity and reflection that would definitely impact instruction. Conducting research projects such as this one and sharing our findings with other teachers, challenging them to duplicate the process and critically examine the results of their own pedagogy may prove a fundamental step in radically transforming classroom instruction and making schools into the kinds of places we would like them to be.

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